

RURAL TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN SARAWAK

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Contents

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3 Impact of Rural Tourism 33

3.1	Assessing the Impacts of Rural Tourism	34
3.2	Economic Impact	34
3.3	Socio-cultural Impact	36
3.4	Cultural and Heritage Impact	38
3.5	Environmental Impact	43
3.6	Conclusion	47

4 Destination Competitiveness and Challenges 49

4.1	Challenges in Rural Tourism	50
4.2	Managing Destination Competitiveness	52
4.3	Competitive Advantages of Tourism Destination	53
4.4	Case studies of Rural Tourism Sites in Sarawak	54
4.4.1	Samunsam Wildlife Sanctuary	55
4.4.2	Kampung Semadang	56
4.4.3	Bako National Park	57
4.4.4	Tanjung Datu National Park	58
4.4.5	Kubah National Park	60
4.4.6	Bario Highlands	62
4.4.7	Annah Rais Longhouse	63

5 Critical Success Factors for Rural Tourism 65

5.1	Natural Resources	66
5.2	Heritage, Special Events and Range of Activities	67
5.3	Infrastructure and Accessibilities	70
5.4	Leadership and Local Champion	71
5.5	Communities' Support	72
5.6	Service Quality	73
5.7	Conservation and Education	73
5.8	Conclusion	74

6	Information and Communication Technology	75
6.1	Technology in Tourism	76
6.2	Benefits of Information and Communication Technology	78
6.3	Smart Tourism	79
6.4	Innovation in Tourism	80
6.5	Conclusion	82
7	The Way Forward for Rural Tourism	85
7.1	The backdrop	85
7.2	Rethinking Rural Tourism Research and Practices	86
7.3	Suggestions for Future Development	87
7.3.1	Participatory Approach	87
7.3.2	Resource Management	88
7.3.3	Customization and Repositioning	91
7.3.4	Managing Expectation	92
7.3.5	Communities' Optimistic Mindset	94
7.3.6	Capability Enhancement and Professionalism	95
7.3.7	Tourism in the Digital Era	97
8	Conclusion	99
	List of Awards	101
	Bibliography	103

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Tourists' Arrival and Income Generated in Malaysia	4
Figure 1.2	Tourists' Arrival in Sarawak	7

List of Pictures

A pristine rural tourism site	3
Natural wonders of rural tourism	6
Tourists relaxing and enjoying the natural environment	8
Heritage antique – <i>Bujang Sadok</i> Canon	9
Nature at rural tourism site	11
Traditional weaving and basketry locally produced by the community	14
Handmade traditional costumes of various display at Sarawak Textile Museum	19
Rural tourism activities – boat ride across the river	20
Tourists hiking through virgin rainforest and exploring caves	22
Traditional food prepared by the local communities	23
Traditional handicraft with unique cultural identity	24
Local guides showing tourist rural attraction while making extra income	25
Telecentre at Bario Kelabit Highlands supported by government	27
Solar panel projects provided by the local authorities at a rural tourism site	29
Locals providing river transport and benefitting through tourism	36
Locally made traditional arts and crafts	37
Handmade Handicrafts by local communities	38
Bidayuh Gong and <i>Ketawak</i>	39
Heritage building - Chinese History Museum	40
Hand-drawn art by local communities	41
Ethnic Cultural Performances	42
Tranquillity of rural tourism destination	44
Unique wildlife species	44

Activities at rural attractions	45
Air connectivity through a twin otter plane to some rural destinations	51
Tourists enjoying local food prepared in bamboo	54
Samunsam Wildlife Sanctuary	55
Abundance of diverse wildlife	56
Kayaking adventure at Kampung Semadang	57
The beauty of the beach at Bako National Park	58
Tanjung Datu National Park	59
One of the Homestays at Kampung Telok Serabang	60
The Waterfall at Kubah National Park	61
Paddy field at Bario Highlands	62
Uniqueness of Annah Rais hot spring	64
The historical Monument of Fort Margherita	67
Wide variety of outdoor activities available for tourists	68
Unique local festivities – Regatta	69
Various options made available through tourism mobile applications	76
Detailed information provided on specific tourism destination	77
Online tourism portal	78
3D model of various tourism site	81
Experiencing tourism site through Virtual Reality (VR)	82
Rope bridge over a river	88
Lookout tower for scenic views	89
Wildlife Conservation – sea turtle hatching	89
Local communities guiding tourists through river rapids	90
Natural wonders – beautiful waterfalls	91
Fresh food cooked in traditional methods at rural tourism destination	93
Handicrafts on display in front of homestay	95



Preface

The tourism industry integrated with technology, social, cultural, environmental and economic transformations have brought about successive changes and have resulted in a growing number of tourists to the rural tourism destinations. Although there has been vast interest in the development of the rural tourism to improve economic standing of the rural communities, the complexities of the tourism development have always been underestimated. Rural tourism destinations have its own resources and locational requirements that must be met to be sustainable. Therefore, a sustainable tourism destination must adopt a holistic and integrated approach from various perspectives of the stakeholders. The tourism sector in Malaysia is one of the cornerstones of the Malaysian economic diversification strategy. Besides that, the tourism industry is the second largest industry in Malaysia. The book has been written predominantly based on a set of multi-dimensional components in mind, and its impact on the business tourism's sustainability with an emphasis on rural destinations. The tourism stakeholders' perspectives will be investigated to facilitate the management and planning of rural tourism. As the competition for tourism industry is becoming more and more challenging, rural destinations need to leverage on its resources and capabilities to create their own identity to sustain their competitive advantages. Therefore, the objective of the book was also to gain insights into the ways in which the management of rural tourism business could leverage on the location niche and unique selling proposition to

generate better income from tourism. Past studies have been found to have empirically examined rural tourism destinations in Malaysia based on the tourists, communities, and internal industries (e.g., communities and local industry players) or the external industries' (e.g., tourists) perspectives. Additionally, studies have also examined the impact of these tourism business on the environment of the rural tourism. No studies have simultaneously investigated rural tourism from the stakeholders' point of view and how these attributes would align with the government's policy. This interactional perspective remains largely unexplored in the context of promoting the rural tourism industry in Malaysia. Thus, this book is unique in a way whereby the chapters have deliberately aimed to bridge the gaps and gain some understanding as to how the perceptions of the rural tourism from various stakeholders influence issue of sustainability faced by the rural tourism destinations in Malaysia. The book endeavours to determine the critical success factors and to determine the destination image in the eyes of all these stakeholders. This study is perhaps the first systematic attempt to integrate the stakeholders who are involved directly and indirectly in the development of rural tourism. It is believed that this book will be able to facilitate and assist the tourism sector by adopting a multidisciplinary knowledge, which is needed for the management of the rural destination. Additionally, it will also gauge the magnitude of knowledge, which can enhance the rural destination's competitiveness. In addition to that, a holistic rural tourism model is as good as impossible in a rural destination if good planning, and a management system, which involves various partners in the tourism industry is not in place. Therefore, this study is hopeful that rural tourism can bring in existing and potential stakeholders to highlight the relevant tourism products and services in the rural destination. Successful rural tourism planning will be able to help in generating more income for the local people and allow the destination to create a sustainable development strategy. Additionally, it will also conserve and preserve the nature and cultural heritage, create better quality services and product, and eventually present these products and services in the tourism market at a professional level.

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Tourism

An Introduction

The tourism industry has seen immense growth over the past few decades as people are seeking tourist destinations for them to relax and unwind. Tourism is regarded as an instrument through which the local economy could benefit from positive benefits and advantages that occur elsewhere in other parts of the world (Carmignani & Moyle, 2019). In general, tourism leverages on a variety of factors such as environment and sceneries, culture, heritage, and natural resources, infrastructure, conservation, education in attracting tourists for the tourism destination. Tourism can be further classified as an economic sector that is associated with relaxing and leisure is deemed as one of the fast-growing industries in many countries that significantly enhance the local economies. Bagio (2019) defined tourism as a complex phenomenon that could only happen with the inclusivity of an incredible number of organizations, behaviours, events and activities, agencies and sectors and various stakeholders across places or countries. Past researchers (e.g., Lo et al., 2013) elucidated that tourism industry has seen remarkable growth and evolving into various subthemes such as urban tourism, sports tourism, religious tourism, ecotourism, education tourism, business tourism, rural tourism, medical tourism, extreme tourism, literary tourism and many others. This signifies a growing trend of tourists travelling to rural destinations for leisure and recreational activities.

Sustainable development in tourism has gradually gained the interest and focus of policymakers, government and private sectors, including industry players, local communities and researchers (Hall, 2019). Presently, the issue of tourism sustainability has become highly critical and stakeholders have realised that sustaining it enabled the destination to obtain its competitiveness. For example, due to the intensely competitive nature of the tourism business, tourism players have to offer superior services to stay in the business. Undoubtedly the success and failure of tourism development at the destinations also influenced by local communities' attitudes toward tourism in their areas. Therefore, community support is one of the vital elements to ensure long term success and sustainability hence it is crucial to involve tourism stakeholders in tourism development as the niche of the areas is from community resources (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). In the same vein, the progression of rural tourism also hinges on the appropriate policy implementation, guidelines and strategies that would assure everyone who is directly or indirectly involved in tourism. Additionally, it is also important to ensure that negative impact on the rural destination such as the over-development and over-exploitation of the available natural and physical resources should be kept to a minimum and properly monitored so that the quality of life of the local communities will be maintained.

1.1 Rural Tourism in Malaysia

The tourism sector is noted as one of the largest economic contributors to Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP). The significance of the tourism sector to the Malaysian economy is glaring whereby various destinations in Malaysia, such as in main cities, have seen tremendous efforts being taken to develop the tourism industry. Past researches have documented six trips facets attracted tourists and had a significant impact on total tourists' expenditure. These six facets are known as (i) attractions (ii) accommodations (iii) destinations (iv) activities and events, (v) restaurants, and (vi) shopping (de Souza, Mendes Filho, & Buhalis, 2019). Liu (2006) has posited that in Malaysia, one of the strategies to develop rural planning is through rural tourism activities. Most tourists who travel to developing countries are normally interested in tourism that is culture or heritage-based tourism as developing countries are rich and mostly unexploited natures and resources that provide the elements necessary for tourism that is based on culture and heritage.



A pristine rural tourism site

Rural tourism in Malaysia comprises of many rural areas, whereby each of the rural areas is blessed with distinct and diverse attractions. Within Malaysia, it is conspicuously apparent that these industry champions are vital in creating a demand for tourists visits to rural areas. This is because tourist's arrival in Malaysia vis-à-vis the income generated by their visitation has been showing an upward trend in the past years. In general, Malaysian rural tourism characteristics are shaped by multiple ethnicities with diverse ethnicity, values and mixed cultures of the local communities (Lo et al., 2013) and it is regarded as one of the main emphases by the Government of Malaysia. Rural tourism in Malaysia is believed to have the potential to offer distinctive opportunities to accomplish visitors' tourism expectations. Therefore, in efforts to promote tourism in the Malaysian rural settings, a major focus on agriculture tourism, culture or heritage tourism, arranging, promoting, impacts on the economy and community and many others should be emphasised. In Malaysia, most communities in rural areas have limited understanding of the concept of tourism development and planning, which ultimately restricts their level of participation and impedes the process of achieving sustainable rural tourism development (Liu, 2006).

Malaysia’s tourism development has been employing a “top-down” approach for sustainable tourism planning and development with considerable amount of physical work and guidelines being controlled and devised by local government due to local communities’ lack of understanding about the planning process towards the participation processes and their exclusion from the participation process (Marzuki, Hay, & James, 2012). Lo et al.’s (2012) findings stipulated that participation by local communities and indigenous people in decision making of rural tourism development contribute to social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability. Hence, it is time to involve communities in the development of their areas by providing them with essential training and knowledge.

The concept of sustainability is crucial to the Malaysia tourism industry as the number of tourist arrivals has increased significantly since 1998 evident from the data obtained from Sarawak Tourism Quick Facts 2018 as shown in Figure 1.1. From the years 2000 to 2018, tourists visiting Malaysia have increased from 10.22 million visitors to 25.83 million visitors. Within the same timeline, tourists generated income to the country from RM17.3 billion in 2010 to RM84.14 billion in 2018.

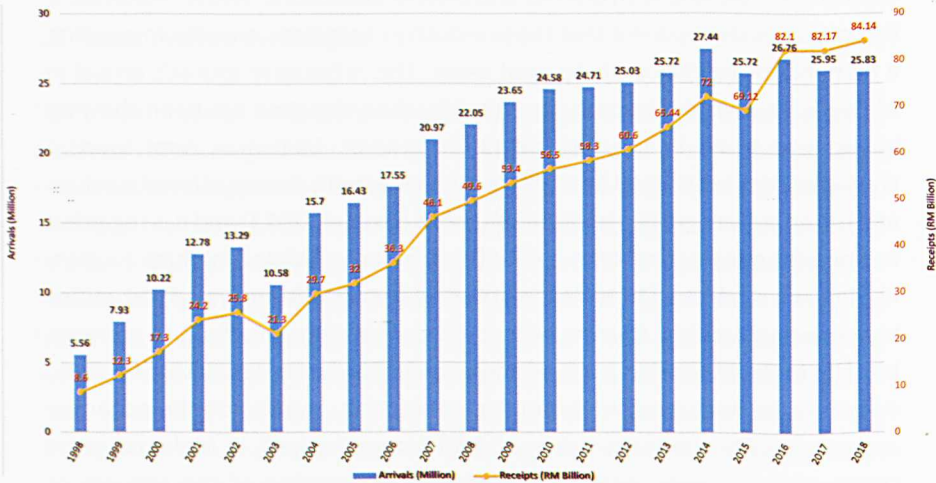


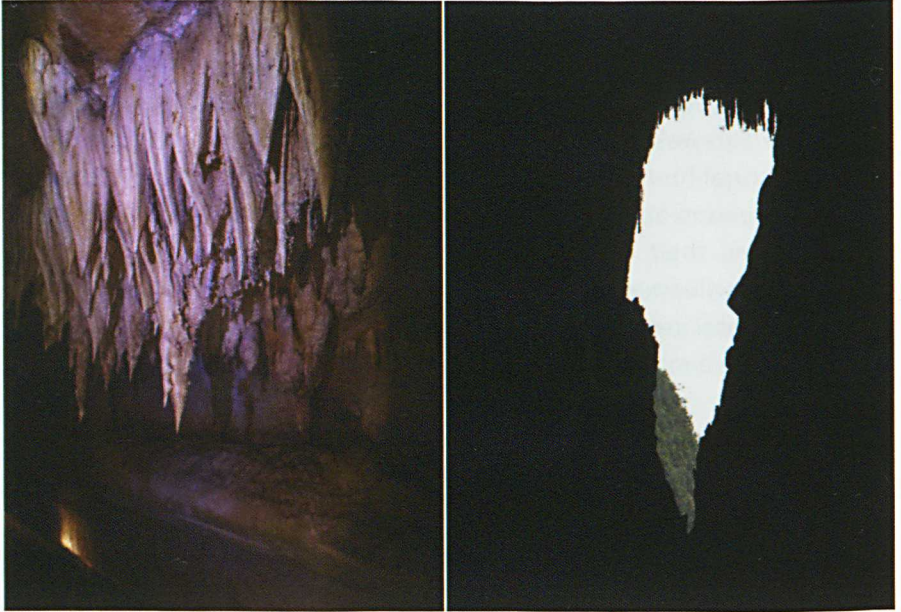
Figure 1.1 : Tourists' arrival and income generated in Malaysia

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Youth and Sports: Sarawak Tourism Quick Facts 2018

1.2 Tourism in Sarawak

Sarawak is naturally rich in natural resources. The vast geographical areas of Sarawak have resulted in tourism stakeholders to set their focus on rural tourism as tourism has provided the potential alternative wealth creation and has also been regarded as a tool to improve local welfare and their living standards. As such, it is advisable for rural tourism development to include local communities and cover a wide range of local resources as the capability of tourism is unlimited in contributing a major income to the state and country's economy.

Sarawak, which consists of abundant natural heritage and distinctive culture offer advantages in the management and development of tourism. Due to the many product offerings, it is targeting more tourists' arrival and has been expected to generate employment opportunities for the residents in years to come. Realising the importance of the tourism industry as the engine of the country's economic growth, it is vital to focus on enhancing the rural destination competitiveness and progression. By offering rural tourism, this provides opportunities for visitors to enjoy and experience the natural and cultural atmosphere, economic and social gain, nature, environment, and local culture conservations and preservation. It is unavoidable that there are strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats where tourism can bring about to the destinations. Hence, in the efforts to promote and market rural tourism, it is imperative to leverage the strengths and to deliberate the maximum potential of rural tourism opportunities, while at the same time minimise and control the damages to the rural sites.



Natural wonders of rural tourism

Within the Sarawak setting, the tourism industry faces various challenges such as the need to improve air link connectivity to various tourism destinations in the state. In Sarawak, one of the problems encountered by the tourism sector is the shortage of direct international air connections to these tourists' attractions. Additionally, the Sarawak tourism industry would have to expand and widen various products and services offerings. Another issue that needs to be addressed is visitors' satisfaction to ensure repeat and loyal customers, and the need to enhance the skills of the industry workforce due to the reasonable lack of communication skills. Furthermore, to improve efficiency, there is a need to create an integrated network system.

Therefore, it is imperative to instill proper planning in rural destinations that would be beneficial to the local communities. For city folks, the rural areas provide them with peaceful sanctuary, whereas for rural communities, the tourism industry may create divergence and unhappiness as the high arrival of visitors may cause racket and overcrowding. Thus, tourism development,

which has been poorly planned may negatively affect the lives in the rural community and destruct the natural beauty of the environment. It is crucial to consider the environmental aspects to lower the negative effects of tourism and how the involvement of the local communities are vital to the whole development process and to evaluate the tourism potential in their areas, through proper and coordinated tourism management. Lo *et al.* (2013a) observed that any successful tourism development rested on the participation of the local communities, their knowledge about their community, and how they could satisfy the tourists' needs and wants, which in turn will sustain the development of rural tourism. Figure 1.2 refers to the tourists' arrival in Sarawak.

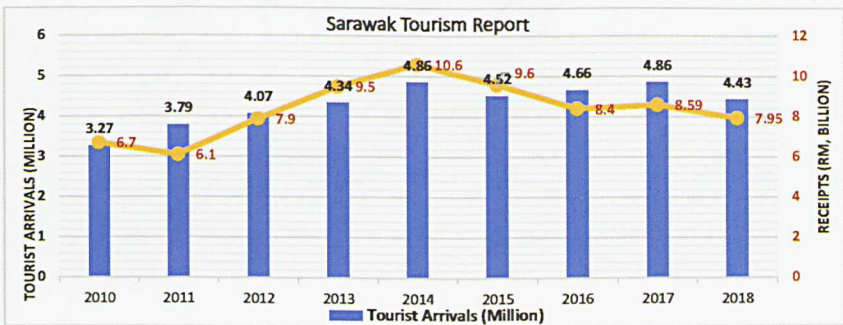


Figure 1.2 : Tourists' arrival in Sarawak

Source(s): Immigration Department Sarawak (IDS), 2018; State Planning Unit (SPU), 2018.

Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Youth and Sports Sarawak (MTACYS), 2018.

Numbers highlighted in red indicate decrement.

1.3 The Development of Rural Tourism

Rural tourism provides a unique and valuable industry as it is one of the ways for rural communities to obtain employment opportunities which ultimately improves their quality of life (Warren, 2013; Chin, Lo, Nair, & Songan, 2016). Rural tourism has been developed and described as various activities that are taking place in surroundings that are not in urban or developed areas, with agricultural or forestry being the primary activities (Beeton, 2006).

Past researchers (e.g., Erdeji, Gagic, Jovicic, & Medic, 2013) identified rural tourism as a suburban environment, which has included natural, ethnic, and heritage for visitors to relax. The uniqueness of rural tourism is that it provides physical natural environment which translates to an area that is less congestion compared to urban setting, offering relaxation, hence for tourism destinations to be competitive, their unique features, sceneries, and attractions must be fully utilised, developed and publicised (Mohamad, Lo, Songan & Yeo, 2012).



Tourists relaxing and enjoying the natural environment

Previous studies (e.g., Oppermann, 1996; Pakurar & Olah, 2008; Lo, Songan, & Mohamad, 2013) have documented that the term “rural tourism” has been used interchangeably with some other tourism terms such as ecotourism, nature-based tourism, agro-tourism, equestrian tourism, rural heritage tourism, adventure tourism, ecotourism, nature-based tourism, and village tourism. Over the years, tourism has experienced tremendous changes, in terms of both demand and supply, political-economic changes, technological innovation, and socio-cultural transformations, which represent either the opportunities or challenges of tourism development. As tourism encompasses multiple aspects, below are some salient characteristics of the tourism terminologies.

Heritage tourism is defined as leisure traveling, to experiencing historical places and activities (Braithwaite & Lee, 2008). In some countries, government agencies are keen to promote heritage resources as part of the rural tourism activities (Laing, Wheeler, Reeves, & Frost, 2014).



Heritage antique – *Bujang Sadok* cannon

On the other hand, agritourism is when “tourism products which are directly connected with the agrarian environment, agrarian products or agrarian stays are called agritourism”. Some farming activities were also suggested to attract visitors to these places such as farmers’ markets, roadside stands, overnight farm or ranch stays, agriculture-related festivals and museums (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008). In contrast, nature-based tourism is referred to as ecotourism or recreation-based tourism, which underscore any activities that leverage on nature and environmental resources such as flora, fauna, and wildlife as a tourism attraction (Parker, 1993). In addition to that, there are several definitions with regards to rural tourism which highlights the issue of the unclear definition of “rural area” and the inconsistent characteristics of “rurality” (Simkova, 2007; Gopal, 2008). The World Tourism Organization refers

to rural tourism “as a term used when rural culture is a key component of the product” (UNWTO, 2004). As such, rural tourism was introduced to satisfy the visitors’ craving to explore new places while appreciating beautiful and diverse sceneries as well as to admire important architectonic accomplishments.

1.4 Benefits and Costs of Rural Tourism

Development of sustainable rural tourism has illustrated that sustainable development in this area has endeavoured to enhance the residents’ economic wellbeing as well as preserving the natural surroundings of the tourism destination. In the same vein, the relationship between rural tourism and other forms of tourism is extremely important, as it establishes the linkages between natural, human, economic, and social parameters that would result in tourism growth and sustainable development. Rural tourism provides several benefits to the local communities as it enables the upgrading of existing infrastructures, provides job employment opportunities and enhances income of the residents, economic viability, social and political networking, private-sector support in establishing sustainable tourism and hospitality initiatives at the same time preserving the traditional cultural heritage (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019). It was noted that by maintaining the original landscape, this would generate top quality experience for visitors to the tourism destination.

In the long run, the economic relationship between tourism destinations and the auxiliary services will be a major contributor to the national economy. Dwyer and Kim (2003) postulated that apart from the environmental factor, tourism infrastructure is an important factor in determining destination competitiveness (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2008). This is because good infrastructures at the tourism sites help to provide accessibility for tourists and this increases the competitiveness of the destination (Hsueh & Yeh, 2014). Tourism infrastructure also underlines the fundamental attraction of the destination that makes it accessible to tourists (Mazilu & Stancioiu, 2009; Moric, 2013). Hence, from the communities’ perspectives, the number of tourist arrivals must be regulated to ensure the quality of environmental conditions (Chin, Lo, Nair, & Songan, 2016).

Additionally, by providing tourism, it offers revenue and financial diversification to communities in the rural areas and this will accelerate the economy. Moreover, tourism activities provide various direct gains from visitors' spending such as visitors' contributions towards the local governments' revenues that enable improvements in the quality of life by having better financing of community facilities, restaurants, and shops. Events organised by the local community that is intended for tourists will also draw residents and visitors from nearby areas, in which the visitors may end up moving to the community if they find the destination pleasant and liveable. Tourism is also seen as creating new jobs either part-time or seasonal employment in the community, albeit the jobs may not be offering a high salary due to the nature of rural tourism.



Nature at the rural tourism site

It is without a doubt that tourism developments enable the quality of life of the residents living near the tourist destinations to be protected, and allow a more sustainable tourism industry for investors and stakeholders (Rahmani, Hajari, Karimian, & Hajilo, 2013). Nonetheless, rural tourism has also been faced with various problems such as dearth of support/training and facilities from the local governments, and the high development costs, lack of demand,

unskilled workforce, shortage of manpower, ineffective promotional tools, the dominance of large industry players, fragmented tourism development strategies, inability to address the strengths and weaknesses of rural tourism setting, absent of local communities' participation and over-development (Sharpley, 2002; Su, 2011; Lo, Cheuk, & Atang, 2015).

Overdevelopment of rural tourism has the propensity to damage major tourism attractions (Sanjay, 2008). Rural areas have the attractions of its distinct culture, history, natural environment, beautiful landscape (as shown in Figure 7) and unique ethnicity of tourism destinations. These facilities are vital elements in the development of the quality of the destination quality (Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000) and competitiveness (Tozser, 2010). Without careful management, visitors may destroy delicate environmental attractions at a location, and reduce the attractiveness and the uniqueness of natural resources (Angelkova, Koteski, Jakovlev, & Mitrevska, 2012). It is therefore crucial for the implementation of sustainable strategies of rural tourism to include extended social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits while simultaneously deliver stakeholders' needs and aspirations. Past researchers (e.g., Ruiz-Molina, Gil-Saura & Moliner-Velázquez, 2010; Moric, 2013) evidenced that tourism has the potential of creating communities' source of income and has been regarded as a tool to improve local communities' welfare, and improve their quality of life (Aliman, Hashim, Wahid, & Harudin, 2016; Probstl-Haider, Melzer, & Jiricka, 2014;). Ultimately, the communities should be its main beneficiary as the tourism sector has great potential to increase a nation's wealth (Kalaiya & Kumar, 2015). Hence, it is concluded that for some tourist destinations instead of advancing and sustaining the tourism business in local communities, they have added costs and compelled public services to provide superior offerings. The cost of conducting research, analysing findings, publicities, insurance, and operations have been concerns that require additional attention.